

PETE SEEGER'S HOMEMADE MUSIC

BY MIKE ERVIN

If you're one of the many who still think of Pete Seeger as a lanky youngster strumming a banjo and belting out songs at a peace rally or on a union picket line, you'll be surprised to know that he's sixty-six years old now and talks about quitting singing pretty soon to spend long-overdue time with his family.

For the moment, though, Seeger's schedule is more crowded than ever. Last winter, he was even too busy to pursue one of his favorite forms of relaxation—making maple syrup. He performs coast-to-coast, most often free to support worthy causes.

These days, Seeger and his wife Toshi spend much of their time working with the Clearwater organization, which he helped launch in 1969. The focal point of Clearwater is a sailing vessel of the same name, a 100-ton antique sloop that plies the Hudson River, often passing the Seeger home in Beacon, New York. The sloop's original purpose, and the organization's, was to remind area residents of the river's beauty and to mobilize resistance against the river's pollution. All that has been achieved, but Clearwater has become something more—a style of activism and an integral part of the Hudson River culture. There are Clearwater holidays, Clearwater festivals, and, of course, Clearwater songs.

Seeger's book, *Carry It On*, a history in song and pictures of working men and women in America, was published in late 1985. It includes eighty union songs, some well known and some obscure.

Q: How do you define folk music?

SEEGER: The term was invented about 130 years ago in Europe, and it meant "the music of the peasant classes, ancient and anonymous." By that standard, of course, America has no folk music. But around the turn of the century, people in this country began collecting cowboy songs and Negro spirituals, and they said, "This is folk music, too."

Then along came people like Woody Guthrie. Until he met some folklorists, he had never heard the term folk music. They

Mike Ervin is a free-lance writer in Chicago.



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said, "Woody, you're a true folk musician," and he said, "Am I?" Well, he wrote a little magazine piece called "Ear Music." "By this I don't mean that you strum the guitar with your ear," he wrote. "I mean you learn it just by hearing it and other people learn it just by hearing you." It was a beautiful description of folk music.

What I learned from Woody was that

you could make up a song about anything—good, bad, funny, sad.

Q: Would you say, then, that there are essentially two types of music—classical, made by artists, and folk, made by folks?

SEEGER: In the early days, there was only one kind of music. When our ancestors lived in tribes, hunting animals and gathering roots and berries, all the men sang

the same hunting songs and all the women sang the same lullabies. Then some shrewd people invented agriculture, and class society developed. Rich people could afford to hire someone to make music for them, and this was the beginning of fine-arts music. But poor folks still made their own music.

The rise of the cities led to a third kind of music: Some of the folks found they could pick up coins in the marketplace by making music, and their music tended to be more sophisticated than the relatively simple music played in the villages. They would swipe a good folk melody and jazz it up for the marketplace, or they would swipe a new idea from the hired musicians at the castle and try that out. And pop music has for hundreds of years occupied this middle ground between folk music and classical, and it has tended to vary more with the seasons and the fashions and the fads.

Q: You suggested once that *Sing Out!* magazine ought to change its name from "the magazine of folk music" to "the magazine of homemade music." Why?

SEEGER: I think it would be more accurate and more important, too. It would signify being more concerned with the kind of music people make, not the kind people listen to. I don't want to ignore those who just sit and listen, but I'm really hippped on the subject that this world won't survive unless people realize that it's a lot of fun to do things yourself.

Music is something literally everybody can do. You don't have to be born with a good voice. Some of the best folk music in the world is made by parents and grandparents putting children to sleep.

I'd like to persuade everybody everywhere to make music. Your repertoire doesn't have to be great; just sing the songs you like to sing. Over the years, they'll sound better and better. It's like knowing how to cook a good dish, and improving it over the years. Some of the best folk musicians I've ever known didn't have a great many songs in their repertoire, but the ones they knew they knew awfully well.

Q: What do you mean when you say we won't survive unless we learn to do things ourselves?

SEEGER: Well, we live a much more comfortable life than our ancestors, who had to endure cold and heat and hunger and often an early death. But I don't think we're happier. Anthropologists tell us about tribes in far-off places where life is less rushed and often full of laughter.

I believe we've forgotten what fun it is to lead a well-rounded life in which you do a little of this and a little of that. Our age of specialization makes for efficient production, but not for happiness.

Q: When I go to one of your concerts, I see the whole audience singing along—everyone from five-year-olds to ninety-five-year-olds. But the problem is they only do



it there; they sing very little after they leave the hall. Workers at the *Chicago Tribune* have been out on strike for months, and whenever I pass their picket line they look glum and solemn. Why don't they sing, the way strikers used to in the old days?

SEEGER: Maybe some professions, some unions, sing more than others. Among Afro-American people there's a very strong tradition that music is part of life, and unions with black members tend to do a lot more singing.

There was a strike at Yale University about a year ago—2,000 lab and clerical workers, most of them young women. They found themselves putting new words to pop tunes, and their picket lines were so musical they were the talk of the town. It kept their morale high, and they eventually won their strike. I think music was one of the reasons. John L. Lewis is supposed to have said, "The singing army is a winning army."

Q: Do you sense that we don't sing as much as we used to?

SEEGER: Yes, we're getting so used to being spectators. Television is the primary reason, but I also suspect our educational system, which puts a premium on shut-up-and-listen.

Q: How did you come to serve as a bridge between the traditional Left, with its belligerent demands for an ever bigger piece of the pie, and the modern "greens," who emphasize pacifism and conservation?

SEEGER: I've been a reader all my life, and along about 1962 I read a book called *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. In her own way, she was a great internationalist. She believed that unless we had international laws internationally enforced, we would lose the air, the water, the soil, the world.

The present generation would have stolen it all from future generations.

I decided she was right. I did more reading and came to the conclusion that most unions, most socialist-minded people, weren't paying enough attention to environmental issues. So I've been trying to make a connection between the two ever since.

Q: How deep is the division?

SEEGER: My guess is there is much more polarization among organizational bureaucracies than among members. A leader's job is to maintain the narrow focus. The president of an auto corporation concentrates on making cars and doesn't worry about rail transport or bicycles or boats. Similarly, the head of a union tends to think his main job is getting higher wages for the members, not worrying about the quality of the air breathed by union members' families.

I believe that's wrong. It's another example of overspecialization in modern life.

Q: But unlike many other "greens," you're not a pacifist?

SEEGER: Not in the sense that the word has for the average person, though I probably find myself thinking like a pacifist more than most.

A few months ago, I was singing for some Arabs, and for the first time in my life I tried singing a song in Arabic. At the same time, I got off a flip statement that was widely misinterpreted, and for which I've been severely criticized: I said it was better to massacre a language than to massacre a people. Everybody assumed I was accusing the Israeli government of massacring the Palestinians.

Well, I started thinking about it, and it occurred to me that every government in

the world has been associated with a massacre of some kind. You probably can't have a war or a revolution without having a massacre. I'm not enthusiastic about it at all.

Q: But you believe violence is necessary?

SEEGER: Whether it's necessary or not could probably be infinitely argued. I know that for some years Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua maintained a pacifist retreat where he claimed that by following Jesus and turning the other cheek they would rid themselves of the dictator, Somoza. But finally he decided he was wrong, and extended a hand to the guerrillas in the hills. And my guess is that I would probably have gone along with him.

It's kind of high and mighty for someone up here to say to people who've endured Somoza's dictatorship for fifty years, "Oh, you must not use guns." And the same applies to South Africa: For us to tell the South Africans they must not use guns is kind of foolish. Not only are they 10,000 miles away, but we haven't endured what they've had to endure.

But the big danger about using guns is once you start, where do you stop? It becomes very tempting to think, "Well, we solved that problem with guns. Let's solve another problem with guns."

Q: Tell me about Clearwater. Does your heavy involvement mean you believe environmental protection is the key issue?

SEEGER: No. The key issues are those that are close to you, geographically as well as spiritually. If someone says, "I want to change the world. Where do I go?" I answer, "Stay right where you are. Don't run away. Dig in."

Q: But then who will work on such global issues as the arms race?

SEEGER: My guess is that a lot of people will work on those, but they can still work on local issues at the same time. The world needs a certain number of traveling salesmen and diplomats, but maybe they should just be traveling salesmen and diplomats for part of their lives. After you've done your job nationally or internationally, go back home.

Q: What has Clearwater accomplished?

SEEGER: We've helped on many things, but I think the main thing Clearwater did was keep the river in public consciousness. We have this beautiful, beautiful sailboat, 106 feet tall, one of the handsomest boats ever designed. It goes up and down the Hudson, taking tens of thousands of schoolchildren out for sails. Hundreds of thousands of people come to the docks each year to visit.

Q: And in terms of cleaning up the Hudson River?

SEEGER: Clearwater was just one of many organizations that pushed for revising the pure-water laws. It's now safe to swim in the middle part of the Hudson, and in about five more years it will be safe to swim in Albany and New York City. That's

a very concrete victory; most of the beaches were closed fifty years ago.

Q: What's your involvement now?

SEEGER: I'm mainly a rank-and-file member. My wife and I help with the annual festival—the Hudson River Revival—every June, and work year-round with a little support group called the Beacon Sloop Club.

We think we've discovered a good way for an organization to grow. Nobody wants to come to meetings, but my wife says, "Let's not call it a meeting; let's call it a pot-luck supper." It's always a feast—nothing fancy but lots of good food—and we stuff ourselves. Around 7:30, some musicians sing a song or two. Then the chairperson for the evening produces a big sheet of paper with the agenda and we spend two minutes on this, three minutes on that, maybe five or ten minutes for something really important. We manage to cover fifteen or twenty subjects in one hour. Then anyone who wants to can stick around and sing.

This little club is the main reason why our town now has a million-dollar riverfront park. Why? Because we put on festivals—a fish festival in May, a strawberry festival in June, a corn festival in August, a pumpkin festival in October.

Our aim is to show people what fun it is to get involved with the water. They're doing it all up and down the river. There are Clearwater groups in a dozen places.

Q: What about your musical involvement now?

SEEGER: Well, my voice is going, frankly. It never was much of a voice, but now I can't even hold a note, even tone. I'm not sure how many more years I'll keep traveling around.

Q: Your wife says you've been saying that for forty years.

SEEGER: We'll see.

I started singing professionally, you could say, in 1938, when I dropped out of college and was unable to get a job as a journalist. My aunt taught school and said, "Come sing to my class and I'll get \$5 for you." It was another ten years before I could take a few years off in the summer to take my family to the beach.

But since then, my income and my audiences have steadily gone up. I'm almost embarrassed. I'll go sing at a big concert with Arlo Guthrie, and we'll go home with the amount of money some people have to work all year to make. It's really kind of obscene. The only way I can live with myself is that my wife and I live as simply as we can, and I sing for free most of the time.

I'm the luckiest musician I know. I can sing songs I like to sing for people who sing along with me. What more could I want? And my kids have never gone hungry. We even have a little in the bank so that when I do something foolish and have to have an operation—I've had two hernias and a knee operation—I can afford it.

Q: What do you regard as your biggest achievement?

SEEGER: Darned if I know. I used to think my main job was to carry the message of people like Woody Guthrie and others to a new generation. But by the 1960s, I'd done that job. Maybe I should have retired right then and there.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

SEEGER: Oh, just keep in mind that I'm just as dumb as the next banjo picker. Everything I've said should be prefaced with the statement, "It seems to me." ■



PHILIP BURKE